

ENTERING TEACHING FOR AND WITH LOVE: VISIONS OF PRE-SERVICE URBAN TEACHERS

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Abstract

Using a social justice orientation to teacher education and a sociocultural approach to learning, this exploratory study presents data from twenty pre-service urban teachers about their perceptions of and visions for teaching in urban schools. Findings reveal candidates' desires to care for and build relationships with urban youth as a foundation for their interests in teaching and also portray participants' visions of teaching as a way to promote positive social change in their communities. Findings are discussed in the context of future directions for urban teacher education.

Keywords: Pre-service teachers; social justice; sociocultural contexts of teaching

Introduction

An important challenge facing public urban education is the lack of new teachers of Color teaching in their community schools. In fact, White females continue to dominate the teaching force—even in urban communities where youth of Color dominate student populations. This “demographic divide” (Gay & Howard, 2000, p. 1) represents barriers between students' and teachers' cultural worlds and realities, and because of the institutional power dynamics at play in school (e.g. Delpit, 1995; Deschenes, Tyack, & Cuban, 2001), it proliferates the “othering” (Borrero, Yeh, Cruz & Suda, 2010; Kumashiro, 2000) and cultural discontinuity (Tyler, Udqah, et al., 2007) that can define much of the school experience for youth. In urban teacher education research, this demographic divide is the subject of theoretical and pedagogical inquiry about how to best prepare teachers to meet the needs and honor the strengths of their students.

While research and practice need to continue to explore the impact and effect of the demographic divide, it is also important that we as urban education researchers push the conversation forward and talk about future directions in the field. One such direction involves empirical investigation of pre-service teachers of Color who do enter the profession to teach in their community schools. While the percentages of these teachers in the national averages may not be significant, the impact of these pre-service teachers' visions and experiences are vital for the development of enhanced theory and pedagogy in urban education (e.g. Camangian, 2010; Duncan-Andrade, 2007). Without them, we, as urban educators, run the risk of only teaching to the demographic divide, and becoming stagnant.

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The current study reports on findings from a group of pre-service teachers enrolled in an urban education program at a university in California. Their reflections on their reasons for teaching and their thoughts about what makes for effective teaching reveal core beliefs about relationship-building and a love for working with youth. Additionally, their comments reveal a level of community-involvement for social change and a critical analysis of the structures in place within the institution that is school, and make for important considerations in the future of urban teacher education.

Conceptual Framework

Theoretically, this research is framed within a social justice orientation that prioritizes the contextual and sociopolitical importance of teaching and learning. Especially in urban contexts, this approach values the ecological and sociocultural learning of youth (and pre-service teachers) from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Teacher Education for Social Justice

Teaching for social justice embraces the significance and urgency of creating equitable, empowering, humanizing learning contexts for all youth (Camangian, 2010; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; James-Wilson, 2007; Nieto, 2005). Specifically, the current study positions social justice as a foundation in teacher education—especially those programs preparing new teachers to teach in urban schools (Borrero, 2009; McNeal & Salika, 2009; Owens & Song, 2009). This social justice framework involves critical analysis of the systems and power structures in place at school (e.g. Delpit, 1995), and acknowledges the generative involvement of students' (and student teachers') voices (Leistyna & Woodrum, 1996; Mitra, 2006; Solomon & Sekayi, 2007) in the development of pedagogy for social justice.

This critical analysis involves investigation of the cultural experience of school and the distinctions between the cultural lives of teachers and their students. Banks and colleagues (2005) discuss the importance of new teachers learning about their craft, their students, and themselves during their teacher education, and in this sense, the role of reflection and community involvement are vital in discussions of social justice as a part of teacher education. As noted above, the demographic divide (Gay & Howard, 2000) that characterizes a majority of student-teacher backgrounds is important in this analysis, as it highlights the importance of new teachers learning about their students as a part of their training (Banks, Cochran-Smith et al., 2005; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Leistyna & Woodrum, 1996). This is vital in teacher education, as many teachers enter the profession because of the impact that a special teacher had on them in school. This incentive is important for new teachers, but it cannot define their pedagogy—they must learn about their students, their students' families, and their students' cultural and academic lives.

Ecological and Sociocultural Learning

This social justice orientation includes a theoretical approach to learning that acknowledges the multiple cultural contexts that we all navigate as a part of our development. Ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) and sociocultural (Nieto, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978) theories frame this approach and set the foundation for an understanding of urban education that honors

the cultural assets that youth utilize in their learning across contexts (Borrero & Yeh, 2010; Paris, 2010). These approaches combat traditional “banking models” of education (Freire, 1970) and set the stage for humanizing, strength-based pedagogy (Akom, 2003; Camangian, 2010; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Tan, 2009).

Culturally relevant pedagogy adds an important layer to this work, as the need for teachers to acknowledge and promote students’ cultural identities and strengths as a part of their learning as teachers and their classroom instruction (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999). However, we as urban educators cannot stop here. We must continue to push theoretical and practical understandings of teacher education, student learning, and community involvement. The current study utilizes the theories above to frame an understanding of learning and teaching as a complex, multidimensional, fluid undertaking.

Method

Participants in the study were twenty pre-service teachers enrolled in an Urban Education program at a private university in California. These aspiring teachers were surveyed at the start of their first class on the first day of their graduate program in which they earn a Master of Arts in Teaching degree and a California teaching credential. The program they are enrolled in is specifically designed for teachers seeking training in urban education and is not government assisted—all students paid tuition to enter the program. Of the twenty participants six were male and fourteen were female (mean age of 25.6 years), six were Asian/Pacific Islander, four were biracial, six were Caucasian, and four were Latino/a. This demographic represents the general makeup of the local district, and ninety percent of the participants came from local communities.

These twenty pre-service teachers were administered a survey at the start of the semester to gauge their initial impressions and expectations about teaching. The survey asked students to comment on three questions: Why do you want to be a teacher? Why do you want to teach in urban schools? What makes a good teacher? These questions were generated as relevant baseline information for new teachers entering the urban education program (see Borrero, 2009). Students completed the survey in writing, anonymously, on the first day of class. The responses were analyzed by the author and one research assistant who was not involved in the data collection. Before coding, each researcher read surveys independently (Merriam, 1988). Next, each researcher began to underline recurring units (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) from the data. Each researcher then began generating categories of meaning based on different units of data. These emergent categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) included responses like relationship-building, social change, and mutual learning. The researchers used this type of open coding to generate as many codes as possible.

The author and research assistant then met to share their codes and discuss themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in an attempt to group responses based on commonalities about these pre-service teachers’ motivations for teaching urban youth. Both researchers then re-read the surveys, writing down possible themes. The researchers then discussed these themes and did one final read through, identifying specific responses that spoke directly to the agreed upon themes for each question. The responses that are presented were selected for inclusion in the findings because they expose the nature of a given theme (Glesne, 1999), not because they necessarily represent the perspectives of all participants.

Findings

The themes that emerged from students' responses are presented in Table 1 along with the frequency of responses as coded for each theme. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the details of each theme are not fully explicated below. Instead, themes are discussed (and representative responses are reported) for the different survey questions—Why do you want to be a teacher? Why do you want to teach in urban schools? What makes a good teacher?

Table 1
Emergent themes from pre-service teachers' survey responses

Theme	Frequency of code
1. Why do you want to be a teacher?	
a. To work with youth.	18
b. To create social change.	14
c. To learn from/with youth	8
d. To give back/To impact students like teachers impacted me.	8
2. Why do you want to teach in urban schools?	
a. To create positive change in communities.	14
b. To be a role model/To give back to my community.	12
c. To address society's needs.	7
3. What makes a good teacher?	
a. Care/Love for students.	16
b. Empathy.	12
c. Community/Social awareness and a desire to make change.	9
d. Reflection.	8
e. Hard work.	6

Desires for Being a Teacher

Four themes emerged in response to the question “Why do you want to be a teacher”: *to work with youth, to create social change, to learn from/with youth, and to give back/to impact students like teachers impacted me*. This group of pre-service teachers strongly reflected a desire to work with youth as core motivation for entering the teaching profession. Their responses expressed a passion and vision for teaching as a way to connect with youth. Participants expressed this theme with quotes like, “I want to work with and learn from youth” to “I am passionate about working with youth...because teaching has deep social importance.” Fourteen of the participants pushed this aspect of their motivation further, and talked about teaching as a social change agent. For example, one new teacher wrote, “I want to teach to engage in radical change.” Another wrote, “I want to serve youth who are oppressed, marginalized, and disempowered to take back their power and build alongside them in solidarity an educational framework, practice, and system that genuinely serves their needs and pushes them forward in the struggle for social justice.”

Alongside these core desires, participants shared that they wanted to learn from and with their youth. One candidate wrote, “I want to engage in a learning process that is a mutual dialogue between teacher and student.” Further, these new teachers talked about making the classroom a space for open dialogue: “I want to be a teacher in order to help facilitate spaces that enable students to realize their potential as agents of change.” Some participants wrote about their own experiences as students, and being inspired to teach because of the significant impact a teacher(s) had on them. For example, one candidate wrote: “I have had many teachers in my life that have made a positive and profound impact on me. They have changed my life for the better. I would like to make a positive impact on others—especially young people.”

The Desire to Teach in Urban Schools

As an extension of the findings above, three themes emerged from participants’ responses to the question “Why do you want to teach in urban schools”: *to create positive change in communities, to be a role model/to give back to my community, and to address society’s needs*. These pre-service teachers expressed personal connection with the need for teachers in urban contexts. One candidate wrote, “I want to teach in an environment where I can make the most impact and urban schools are that environment. As a male of color, I feel it is important to serve as a positive example for urban students.” Another participant wrote, “I want to teach in urban schools because I believe it is a potent form of working towards social justice. I think it is the first step in forming consciousness and creating social change.”

This group of new teachers also reflected on their own experiences in urban communities, and their desires to give back and make change in their own neighborhoods through their teaching. One participant wrote, “I want to teach in urban schools because in my experience, growing up in [this city], I did not have positive role models who considered my emotional and academic well being in their pedagogy.” Others reflected a passion and a connection to youth in their own neighborhoods: “I want to teach in urban schools because it is my passion. It is all I think about all day, every day. I want to help youth who come from the same place I come from live extraordinary lives—to not escape the hood but reclaim the hood” Some participants reflected this same passion and urgency, but instead of making connections to their own neighborhoods, framed their desires in a larger social need. One new teacher stated, “I want to teach in urban schools to become part of the solution to the current problem I see in education which is the indoctrination and perpetuation of a middle-class, white, male-dominant belief system.”

Qualities of a Good Teacher

The following themes arose when participants were asked, “What makes a good teacher”: *care/love for students, empathy, community/social awareness and desire to make change, reflection, and hard work*. For this question, many participants listed attributes for good teaching. One list was: “love, courage, passion, empathy, reflection, fearlessness.” Another list was, “critical hope (Duncan-Andrade), authentic caring (Valenzuela), dialogue (Freire), humanization (Freire), love (hooks).” Other students wrote more about these traits. For example, one candidate wrote, “A good teacher uses love as their currency...and does not affirm the assertion that there is only one superior way, narrative, history, or language.”

In writing about the importance of caring for students, participants reflected on the need for good teachers to reflect and create space for critique in the classroom. One candidate wrote: “A good teacher is someone who authentically cares and advocates for students to help them achieve their goals in school and in life.” Another new teacher echoed this statement: “a teacher needs self-reflection, love, and a commitment to students’ right to their own self-determination.” Again the theme of teaching as a social change agent came up in participants’ responses to this question. For example, one candidate stated, “A good teacher brings skills rooted in social investigation and class analysis in order to draw from the experiences of the community they serve to create a curriculum that empowers and can bring about change.”

Discussion

Taken together the findings above reveal both common and novel beliefs about teaching by pre-service teachers (e.g. Banks, Cochran-Smith et al., 2005; Camangian, 2010; Nieto, 2002). It is not surprising, for example, that these teachers are entering the profession because they care about and want to work with youth. Nor is it surprising that they highlight caring/love as the most important attribute of a good teacher. What is unique about these new teachers’ responses comes from their experiences as community members and advocates for social change in their own communities. Participants’ responses to all three questions reveal a level of social awareness and activism that highlights the political nature of teaching and the need for urban teachers to engage youth not only in academic content, but in community involvement (Akom, 2003; Borrero, 2009; Butin, 2007; Duncan-Andrade, 2007).

These participants’ responses to the three (potentially benign) survey questions reveal a level of critical self- and community-awareness that cannot be overlooked. When participants write about the oppression and marginalization of youth, they reveal some of their own experiences in urban schools. When they write about creating “humanizing” classroom spaces to combat these conditions, they reveal a level of social and theoretical awareness that goes beyond personal experience (e.g. Tan, 2009). For example, when the pre-service teacher listed “critical hope (Duncan-Andrade), authentic caring (Valenzuela), dialogue (Freire), humanization (Freire), love (hooks)” as attributes of a good teacher, he/she displayed a heightened understanding of critical pedagogy (Camangian, 2010; Leistyna & Woodrum, 1996). It is this level of understanding and awareness that makes these participants’ responses significant in urban teacher education pedagogy and worthy of further investigation in urban education research.

Conclusions

There are many limitations to this study. These twenty pre-service teachers are not representative of those entering the profession (Gay & Howard, 2000) nor can they be essentialized because of their backgrounds or desires to teach in urban schools. The three survey questions that they responded to, and the fact that responses were anonymous are also limiting factors—participants’ cultural backgrounds are not analyzed alongside their quotes, nor are their goals as teachers or prior experiences working with youth. In this way, the findings are exploratory in nature and certainly cannot be assumed applicable in other contexts. These were teacher candidates who entered a specific degree program wanting to study urban education and social justice. Future studies need to examine how participants’ perceptions change/develop over time and how different cohorts of student responses differ from one another. However, the

uniqueness of this sample and the candor of their responses must be accepted as strengths of the study, and their attention to the urgency and transformation needed in urban education must be embraced.

The precision with which these new teachers write about teaching in urban schools and the promotion of social justice is inspiring. They are entering the first day of formal teacher training, yet they possess social and pedagogical awareness about the inequities in urban schools and the need for teachers to combat them (Akom, 2003; Delpit, 2005; Deschenes, et al., 2001; Nieto, 2002, 2005; Tan, 2009). In so doing, they bring critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) to the study of urban teacher education, as they represent progress from discussions about the demographic divide that separates youth from their teachers (Gay & Howard, 2000). This divide will certainly continue as the populations of communities of Color grow in urban areas and the teaching force remains largely White. However, this does not negate the need for us, as urban educators and researchers, to move the field forward and engage in discourse about pre-service urban teachers who are entering the profession with knowledge and vision to succeed in their community schools. This group of aspiring teachers shows that teaching is all about caring and love, and the love that they bring to the classroom is rooted in the community.

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